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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

# Intelligence Memorandum

*Soviet Policy in the Middle East*

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## Soviet Policy in the Middle East

### Summary

Moscow's interests in the Middle East are largely the traditional geopolitical interests of a great power in nearby smaller states and in important sea routes. An obvious corollary to this is the reduction of Western—now mainly US—influence in the area. Moscow pursues its objectives vigorously, but in a realistic fashion.

- the great diversity of the area confounds any Soviet attempt to lay down and follow a fixed, grand strategy.

- the Soviets have somewhat different interests in the various Arab countries and sub-regions, and what they do in one can work against their interests in another. They must also cope with the phenomenon that great power involvement on one side of a local dispute tends to bring in rivals on the other side.

- nationalism, Islam, and a still-important Western diplomatic and commercial presence act to limit what the Soviets can accomplish.

- the chronic instability of the area throws up new opportunities but also makes commitment to a single regime or cause risky.

There are serious problems for the Soviets in either war or peace in the area.

- war would require the choice of becoming directly involved and risking confrontation with the US, or staying out and seeing Israeli military superiority, which Moscow clearly recognizes, lead to another defeat for the Arabs.

- peace would weaken a major reason for the Soviet presence, and the Arabs might give credit for its achievement to the US.

Soviet interests in the Middle East per se are important, but they are less critical than Soviet relations with the US, Europe, and China.

- if the Soviets are to be encouraged to set limits on their competition with the US in the area, leverage will have to be sought in these broader interests.

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[redacted] *of the Office of Current Intelligence,* [redacted]

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### In Search of a Pattern

Moscow's interests in the Middle East are largely the traditional geo-political interests of a great power in nearby smaller states and in important sea routes. The USSR's desire to improve its competitive position vis-a-vis the US and China on the broader world scene reinforces these interests.

*These Soviet interests have little in common with the interests of the countries of the area. It is not necessarily a Soviet goal, for instance, that Egypt regain the Sinai or Syria the Golan Heights, although to stay on good terms with the Arab capitals, Moscow must appear to support their goals.*

The detailed record of Soviet conduct in the Middle East is more of a warning to those in search of a pattern than it is a clue to the pattern itself. *The outstanding characteristic is flexibility—both in the choice of tactics and of targets.*

The Soviets employ economic and, particularly, military aid to exploit the anti-Western sentiments of many nations in the Middle East. Covert action is another weapon, and the USSR has established a naval presence in the area that serves as a practical reminder of Soviet power.

Where Communist parties are allowed to exist, Moscow has ordered them to work within the existing political system; where they are banned, Moscow has chosen to accept this setback. When things have gone wrong in one country, the Soviets have turned their attention to others. They have not been shy about courting countries such as Jordan, Turkey, and Iran that have close ties with the West and a long-standing distrust of the USSR.

### The Tools of Soviet Policy

**Economic and Military Aid:** Two of the most important tools the Soviets have in the Middle East are economic and military aid. The nations of the area want both, and alternate sources of supply are not easy to come by. Particularly in states which have adopted an anti-Western stance—Egypt, Iraq, Syria—Soviet aid has allowed the USSR to monopolize the field.

From the Soviet standpoint, *both kinds of aid provide useful leverage.* Economic aid may involve bargaining over repayment and helps to strengthen the state sector. Military aid makes the recipient dependent for re-supply, training, and spare parts, puts large numbers of Soviet technicians into the area, and brings trainees to the USSR.

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By the end of 1972, Middle East countries had received Soviet economic aid commitments totaling over \$3 billion, although only about half of this was drawn. Annual commitments have fluctuated, but this has been due mostly to the character of the projects and the problems of the recipient countries, not to changes in Soviet policy. The expulsion of Soviet military forces and advisers from Egypt in July 1972 had no effect on the economic aid program in Egypt.

*Military aid is an even more important policy tool, since it answers a deeply felt local need and naturally tends toward a single-supplier situation. Egypt, Syria, and Iraq have been the chief customers of the Soviet military aid program, which has put some \$5 billion worth of arms into the Middle East. Egypt alone accounts for almost one third of all Soviet military assistance to the Third World.*

Despite the ouster of its military personnel from Egypt, the Soviets have maintained a flow of arms to that country. They have accelerated arms exports to Syria and Iraq. On a smaller scale, they increased arms shipments to Somalia and Yemen (Aden) over the last year. Libya and Iran have received Soviet arms, although their purchases have been restricted to ground forces equipment.

The military relationship has its unhappy aspects. Arab states tend to blame the USSR for their own deficiencies and to compare Soviet equipment unfavorably with Western versions. There are chronic arguments over the supply of spare parts and Arab demands for yet more advanced weapons. Nevertheless, the dependence that has been established is perhaps the strongest single element underlying the Soviet position in the Middle East.

*Naval Activities : Soviet naval use of the Middle East is both a tool of regional Soviet policy and an exploitation of the success of that policy. It serves the USSR's political interests by manifesting a strong Soviet presence and visibly breaking the Western monopoly of external power in the area. The Soviet Mediterranean squadron grew rapidly in the 1960s, but the number of ship-operating days has stabilized since 1970. The force now has a normal contingent of 45 to 50 surface ships and submarines. Operations concentrate in the eastern Mediterranean, where units regularly maintain surveillance of US and NATO navies.*

Although the Soviet Navy lost control of some shore-based facilities in Egypt in mid-1972, it still enjoys regular access to ports and anchorages much as it did before the ouster. Without this access, the readiness and size of the Soviet squadron would drop sharply. The use of repair facilities in Alexandria, for instance, permits Soviet diesel-powered submarines to remain in the area for up to six months before returning to home ports.

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Since mid-1972, Soviet ships and submarines have increased their use of Syrian ports. This will probably continue, although the Syrian ports can never fully take the place of the Egyptian ports. Occasional Soviet calls in Yugoslavia, Algeria, and Morocco do not contribute significantly to the squadron's staying power and efficiency, and the Soviet Navy probably desires easier access to ports in the western Mediterranean. The Soviet Navy may also seek a way to re-establish the capability it lost in 1972 when Soviet naval reconnaissance aircraft were ejected from Egypt. An aircraft carrier suitable for this purpose will not be ready until about 1976.

The Soviet naval presence in the Persian Gulf/Indian Ocean area is much less extensive. Soviet naval forces operate there almost continuously, but no large force of combatants has been committed for sustained operations. The ships that are there have little capability for major naval tasks.

If the US were to increase its naval force in the Indian Ocean substantially, the Soviets would want to increase their own naval presence, as they did in the 1971 India-Pakistan war. The Soviets do not yet have a well-developed naval logistics capability, however, and air reconnaissance in the Indian Ocean will remain a problem unless they can gain staging or basing rights from a littoral country. Their prospects for such base rights may be best in Somalia, where a Soviet-controlled communications facility has been established and where the Soviets already carry out minor ship repairs and are building an airfield. Meanwhile, the Soviets are showing the flag in the area by increasing the number of port calls in Somalia, Yemen (Aden), and Iraq.

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### Constraints on Soviet Policy

**Regional Constraints:** The USSR, like any other outside power, *faces major political obstacles in the Middle East*. In an area where distrust of foreigners is common, Communist ideology is an additional handicap. Islamic religion and culture work throughout the area against the extension of Soviet influence. Where this factor is strongest, as in Libya or Saudi Arabia, it almost completely excludes a Soviet role.

In other Arab societies, Soviet policy must contend with a strong and unpredictable nationalism. Nationalist resentment of the Russians helped to promote Sadat's ouster of Soviet military units and advisers in 1972. Syria and Somalia continue to reject offers of a friendship treaty, despite large Soviet aid investments. Even Iraq, which signed a treaty last year, has now reached an agreement with Western oil countries that reduces its dependence on the USSR. *In short, nowhere in the area have the Soviets established nor are they likely to establish, the degree of control necessary to keep a local government from acting against Soviet advice or interests when the country's leaders so decide.*

Another complicating factor for Moscow is the political instability of many Arab states. As long as the Arab-Israeli impasse continues, so does the need for Soviet help, and *Moscow probably can ride out most leadership changes. But the USSR has had little success in trying to influence the selection of new leaders.* It had to sit by, for example, as Sadat succeeded Nasser and again as he fired and imprisoned individuals, such as Ali Sabri, who were most willing to work with the Soviets. In Syria and Iraq, neither the Soviets nor the local Communist parties have been able to break into the

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political system, which is based largely on army cliques. They could be faced suddenly with new men in power who would owe little or nothing to Moscow for their ascendancy. In Somalia and Yemen (Aden), the Soviets may be better positioned to effect leadership changes, but even here they can hardly have great confidence; their prospects elsewhere are virtually non-existent.

**Other Constraints:** *However much the US may be excoriated for its support of Israel, the US remains in certain respects a potent constraint on Soviet policy.* As a practical matter, the Sixth Fleet is stronger than the Soviet Mediterranean squadron, and the willingness of the US to bring its fleet into play at times of crisis, as demonstrated in the Syrian-Jordanian dispute in 1970, is further cause for Soviet caution.

The US also offers great economic attractions for the Arab world. American equipment and capital investments are sought, in varying degrees, by every country in the area. Moscow can supply some of these needs, but the higher quality of US products is generally appreciated. Despite recent difficulties, Western oil companies still enjoy strong positions in the Arab world and remain crucial to the marketing of this resource. Both the Soviets and the Arabs recognize that the USSR does not offer a realistic alternative in this field.

While the Soviets have been able to exploit to great advantage the link between the US and Israel, *most Arabs believe that only the US can convince Israel to be more accommodating on the subjects that matter most.* This has required Arab leaders to keep open the channels of communication with the US and has worked against greater involvement with the Soviets.

Another outside influence that affects Soviet policy is China. In fact, China has little capability to match Soviet economic aid, no capability to furnish sophisticated hardware, no military presence in the area, and apparently no serious intent to become deeply involved. The constraint in this case is in the eye of the beholder, and the Chinese and the Arabs themselves are willing to fuel Soviet suspicions. In any case, the Soviets will act on their own perception of the Chinese "threat," and since they appear to believe one exists, they must be more sensitive to Arab interests and less aggressive in pursuit of their own.

Another constraint, impossible to measure, lies at home. Soviet aid to the Arabs appears to be genuinely unpopular at all levels of the Soviet population. The costs, the unreliability of the recipients, and the lack of any readily apparent return are all troublesome. In Vietnam, at least, Soviet support was going to fellow Communists.

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The Soviet leadership probably shares some of this popular sentiment. The most serious documented challenge to Brezhnev's leadership came in the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when an ally of Politburo member Shelepin criticized Brezhnev before the Central Committee. Criticism appears to come from both sides—those who say the Soviet Union has put itself into a position of too great a risk in the Middle East, and those who say it has not pushed its case sufficiently. This tends to reduce the likelihood of the adoption of extreme policies.

### Three Problems for Soviet Policy

**The Arab-Israeli Conflict:** This is the initial source—and still the main basis—of the Soviet position in the area. The Soviets are well aware of the risk that a war might involve them directly or lead to another defeat for the Arabs. On the other hand, peace would remove a major reason for their presence in the Arab world. *The USSR consequently has little reason to push for a settlement, the more so since any such efforts seem unlikely to produce one anyway.*

It is conceivable that this policy might change, but for it to do so, Moscow would have to be assured that a settlement or an interim agreement would not seriously undermine its position in the area. It would have to be satisfied that continuing hostility toward Israel would keep Arab needs for military aid high. It would have to be visibly involved in the settlement effort so that it could take credit for any success. The Soviets would also have to believe that the US would in fact press the Israelis to make the kind of territorial concessions that would satisfy the Arabs. They probably would work against a unilateral US effort that would redound only to US benefit in the Arab capitals.

These are formidable requirements. To the Soviets, the chances that they can be met are probably so low that *only substantial incentives in other policy areas outside the Middle East would move the USSR to work seriously toward a settlement. Even then, their commitment would be tentative.*

**The Persian Gulf:** The Soviets are paying increasing attention to this area as its importance in the energy field grows. They have strong positions in Iraq and Yemen (Aden) that, although not guaranteed against the vicissitudes of local politics, rest on a fairly solid basis of military support against hostile neighbors. In these local conflicts, as in the Arab-Israeli case, they will need to take care lest fighting breaks out on a scale which forces them to make risky intervention or see their client defeated.

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*As in the rest of the Middle East, the Soviets will be alert to targets of opportunity. How aggressively they pursue their interests will, in large measure, depend on how they evaluate specific situations.*

*The complex inter-state relations of the area mean that Moscow must walk a careful line as it balances its interests in the various Gulf states. Military aid to Iraq or the establishment of a Soviet military presence there, for instance, probably would encourage Tehran to move toward closer relations with Washington and set back the considerable Soviet effort to cultivate Iran. The Soviets will not, however, allow themselves to be excluded from the area and have the Gulf turned into a Western-dominated lake.*

In the oil business itself, the USSR is not likely to seem an attractive alternative to Western companies, as producer, processor, or consumer, in the eyes of local governments. It will encourage nationalization and offer technical assistance to national companies, but the producing countries will call their own shots in this matter. Moscow recognizes, however, the long-run instabilities of the Gulf arising from the combination of huge revenues and delayed modernization.

**The Palestinians:** The Soviet attitude toward the fedayeen is ambivalent. The Palestinians are an important fact of Middle East life, and the fedayeen number among their adherents some of the best educated and most "progressive" Arabs. The Soviets probably fear that if they are ignored, the Chinese will make inroads. But Soviet efforts to establish meaningful influence over the Palestinians have had little success. Moscow has urged the guerrilla movement to unify itself and has counseled against terrorism to no avail.

From the Soviet viewpoint, the current phase of fedayeen terrorism carries the inherent risk of overheating the Middle East situation. Particularly blatant episodes will be publicly condemned by Moscow, but *the Soviets will also be on the lookout for opportunities to blacken the US image by linking it more closely with Israeli retaliation against the fedayeen. In some cases, this may lead to terrorist attacks on American installations or personnel, but the Soviets almost certainly continue to regard terrorism as hindering the fedayeen cause, and risky for their own.* Whatever individual fedayeen groups do, however, the Soviets will not let themselves be caught in a position of criticizing the movement as a whole, and they are unlikely to cut off their political and military support.

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### Future Possibilities

*The Soviet position in the Middle East, clearly stronger than it was even ten years ago, is more likely to grow than to diminish. There have been fluctuations in Soviet relations with individual countries, however, and the men in the Kremlin are realists about how solid a grip they can get on the region. A general approach of high tactical flexibility has served them fairly well, and they probably do not now see any other basis on which to proceed.*

*The Soviets will go on doing the things they can do on their own. They will improve the capabilities of the Mediterranean fleet and seek to extend its range of operations in the western Mediterranean. They will be on the lookout for shore-based facilities both along the Mediterranean littoral and in the Red Sea - Indian Ocean area. Now that their strategic nuclear parity with the US is recognized, they may exploit their military presence with new confidence, and improvements in sea and air transport will give them new capabilities. But even the achievement of parity with the US does not create the conditions for deliberate confrontation.*

*Especially since the ouster from Egypt, the Soviets have sought to guard against over-involvement in any one state by developing ties with a larger number of countries in the area. Aid programs in the individual countries build a momentum of their own, however, and the Soviets may again find themselves in a situation in which a large and obtrusive military presence stirs up strong feelings against them.*

*However the Soviet Union acts on the major problems it faces in the area, it will never ignore the effect on its relationship with the US, both locally and globally. Nothing will bring the Soviets to give up their interest in the Middle East. But to the extent that the US-Soviet relationship becomes important to the Soviets in other areas, it will increase the incentives for cooperation with the US in the Middle East and reduce the likelihood of Soviet risk-taking there.*

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